

## Understanding and Using the “Success Audit”

### *Defining Success*

Every club defines success differently but there are certain characteristics which all successful clubs seem to exhibit. The first task of any board and general manager is to outline strategic success for their club and the second is to translate that strategic direction into tactics. Tactical success has to do with achieve those strategic goals efficiently, that is with the least expenditure of time, money and resources.

Success in any club involves things---facility, goods and services---dealing with the “hard side” of club management and intangibles which have to do with the “soft side” of the club experience---dignity, status, community, team and exclusivity. It has been said that new members join for mercenary reasons, that is to take advantage of the things being offered by the club, but stay for the intangibles, the emotional component of club membership. Need convincing? Do a random “walk and talk” survey of new members and old, asking each why they joined and why they’re staying. Their reasons will probably be consistent with my own findings---join for the things, stay for the intangibles.

Every club lies somewhere on what I like to call the community / facility spectrum. Some clubs emphasize the “thing side” of the club experience---thirty six holes of golf, twelve restaurants, seventeen bars---whereas others focus on the people relationships. All clubs involve both but each club deals with the spectrum differently. Success is defined differently in every club.

Success is both macro and micro. Macro success has to do with issues sought by the entire membership---perhaps golf---whereas micro success has to do with the needs, wants and specific expectations of the individual member---perhaps the use of the same “lucky” golf cart each day. Successful operations understand the need for attention to both the macro and the micro.

To understand success, you need to do the “walk and talk” at different clubs. After doing your look-and-see, sit down for a moment and ponder the principles which make some successful and others less so. To give you a running start, consider the following over caffeine, then do another tour with my success audit in mind.

### *The Success Audit*

The best clubs are easy to distinguish and it doesn’t really matter whether you’re talking about a yacht club, golf club, country club, city club or a beach club. The principles that underlie their success are easy to identify once you’ve been made aware of their existence. The following are my favorites, broken down into three categories for easy

reference---*Values, People and Things*. I use these audit principles during “walk and talk audits” at my own and other clubs throughout the country.

### Values

1. **A marketing mentality:** Great clubs understand the marketing imperative---find out what they want, then give it to them. This goes for both the membership and the staff. The days of command and control marketing---that is, “take what we give you and like it”--- are gone.
2. **Enthusiasm for a clearly defined mission statement:** Simplicity is the ultimate expression of sophistication. A simple mission statement that captures the needs of the core constituency is best---“We are in the golf business, providing golf to golfing enthusiasts wanting the Scottish golf experience on the coast of the Pacific Northwest.” Such a statement is easy for members, guests, the staff and surrounding community to remember. It tells you what to expect, it gives the club a strategic direction, it appeals to a unique group of golfers and it guides the board during its investment decisions for the course, the clubhouse and the personnel. And once you have the clarity of a mission statement, never underestimate the power of enthusiasm for the vision and its execution. Great clubs are clear in both their mission statement and in their enthusiasm for its pursuit.
3. **Exclusivity and Privacy:** Great clubs nurture their exclusivity and with that their privacy. They know their core constituency, they have rigorous admissions policies and their dues are high enough to provide financial health without having to open their doors to non-member activities---be it golf tournaments or private functions---outside of their core constituency.
4. **Equity thinking amongst members and staff:** People treat things differently when they own something. The best clubs have staff who treat the club like it’s their own. Equity thinkers respect the rules. They act knowing their actions---toward members, staff and facility--- have future consequences and they show an emotional connection to their club which distinguishes them from “renters,” “day users” and “fly-by-nighters.”
5. **The big definition of hospitality service:** Hospitality service involves establishing a personal relationship with the people served. The best clubs have staff who know the members, members who know the staff and staff who know each other. People in the best clubs know that service personalities provide happiness to those being served, give dignity, anticipate needs, know the technology, think clearly, are a presence and do something about problems they see. Two-way service is a reality at the great clubs---staff serve the members and the members serve the staff. Each is in the business of providing hospitality service to the other. You can see it and you can feel it.

### People

1. **Club sense among members and staff:** Club sense is about right behavior in a particular club. Great clubs have staff and members who not only understand right behavior in their club but live according to those standard. Members and staff in great clubs automatically address wrong behavior and act as a community to enforce right behavior. Members in great clubs know what the standards of dress are, when to use or not use cell phone and how to address staff when frustrated by slow service. Great clubs know that club sense takes effort to maintain---training, education, discipline. Having it binds successful clubs into a coherent community of members and staff.
2. **An environment that is entertaining and fun:** People join clubs in part to escape from the rigors of “the real world.” They want to be entertained, they want to smile, they want to feel joy and laughter. The best clubs have a sense of humor and that humor is evident in the discourse between the members, the management and the employee team.
3. **Continuity:** The great clubs have low turnover in the membership, the management team and the staff. Members prize continuity. They’re comforted by the familiar and the predictable. They select well, they’re loyal to those they choose and they value long-term relationships.

4. **A symbiotic management-staff relationship:** Members want to see that the staff and management enjoy their relationship with each other. People walk into great clubs and notice that the employee team seems to genuinely like the manager and that the manager likes them. The way they say “hi” as they pass will speak volumes to the observant.
5. **A symbiotic management-board-member relationship:** Members want to be heard. The old “command and control” ways of imperial boards are gone. Walking into a great club, members and guests quickly notice that members aren’t bad-mouthing the board or grizzling at the manger and that boards and manager aren’t bad-mouthing the membership. Great clubs make sure that these relationships are strong and productive, underpinned by common values and open communications.
6. **Accountability:** People want someone to be accountable for problems when they occur. Members and staff of great clubs are well aware of who’s accountable for what at both the policy and the administration level. Absent is the frustration one feels in not knowing who makes the decisions and who’s responsible for their execution.
7. **Access to those who are accountable:** Successful clubs make sure that the people who make decisions---that is, board members when it comes to policy issues and the general manager when it comes to administrative concerns--- are available to the members and staff, are easy to locate and are both inviting and approachable once found.
8. **Responsiveness from those who are accountable to right wrongs:** People want to see things happen once they’ve identified a problem. The best clubs make sure that the policy authorities---the board--- and the administrative authorities---the general manager and his team---address issues quickly and openly explain their actions or their inaction to the general membership.
9. **Bonding opportunities:** People and communities who have unique group experiences feel bonded together in a special way. Great clubs make sure that these special moments exist collectively for the entire membership and specifically for niche markets within the club. Holiday celebrations, unique club traditions (the opening of summer, the end of summer sky dive by the president) and sports tournaments are a few of the hundreds of ways that this can be done.

### Things

1. **Goods, services, facility and social opportunities appropriate to the core constituency:** Great clubs know their target market, that is their core constituency, and they configure goods, services, facility and social opportunities consistent with that core community. Great golf clubs know that the golfing member is their core constituency and make sure they have a super pro shop, a great pro and greens keeper, an outstanding course and a convivial nineteenth hole for socializing. Great clubs invest available dollars first and foremost in the goods, services, facility and social opportunities asked for by their core constituency.
2. **Quality equal to and beyond member expectations:** “Quality” for a given product has many definitions. The important one for each club is the quality of goods, services, facility and emotions expected by its core constituency. This standard of excellence is not an absolute and is related to the standard of education, affluence, travel and exposure of the membership. A golf club in Aroostook County, Maine in all likelihood will have a different standard of quality than one in Beverly Hills, California. Absolutes aren’t important here since “quality” is defined by the core constituency in a given club. Great clubs know the level of quality expected by their members, provide more than is expected and are committed to moving those expectations to the next higher level of expectation.
3. **Quality that is delivered consistently:** Members return to the club again and again. Predictability is prized. The great clubs establish a level of quality that equals expectations and deliver it consistently over time. Members know they can bring their guests down to dinner and the food will be as they anticipate. Consistency costs money, takes time and requires continuous oversight to maintain. The great clubs do this.
4. **Value for the quality received:** Value is paying the right price for the quality received. Members have a quality standard that’s been developed and nurtured by the club and the surrounding community. They know how much that type of quality costs in their area since, as sophisticated people, they explore alternatives and absorb prices. Value is not about being cheap. Value is about paying a little less than they know the product’s worth in the larger

community. Dues combined with management's commitment to delivering quality goods and services cost effectively make value a reality.

5. **Attention to the details:** Successful clubs know that people see details and draw big conclusions from the little stuff. A half-filled salt shaker might be seen as staff indifference. Newsletter typos might be seen as management incompetence. People see philosophy in the details and the best clubs use this to their advantage.
6. **Aesthetic alignment:** The best clubs make sure that the aesthetics of the club are clearly understood and consistently applied. The aesthetics, involving as they do the five senses, are in agreement. The food is appropriate to the décor of the dining room, the background music is in keeping with the décor, the chair fabric feels right, the flowers smell fresh and the paintings are a comfort. People experience the club and say how nicely things work together. Aesthetic alignment takes work and the best clubs make that investment.
7. **Brand recognition:** The best clubs are easy to distinguish. Each seems to have a symbol of that distinction whether it be a particular sand trap on the golf course, the quality of their food, the view from the nineteenth hole or the youth program they organize year-round. The best clubs leverage that distinction and dramatize their uniqueness. Great clubs avoid becoming lost in the clutter of clubs vying for member / guest / community recognition. They identify, cultivate and protect their brand.
8. **Community Spaces and Places:** Great clubs have spaces and places which provide opportunities for the entire membership to see each other, to be together momentarily and to acknowledge, if only at the sub-conscious level, that they're all part of this special family called club. For the staff, that space might be the collective coffee pot where all staff, from general manager to busboy, gather to get and to sip their caffeine. For the members, it might be a family grill which attracts all ages and all types. Or it might be a common passageway through a seating area that allows everyone to see everyone else at some point during their visit. Whatever the space, the concept is the same---a common area where members see others and are seen, thereby affirming their inclusion in the club community.

### Now What???

The first step toward the realization of your club's potential is the examination of self. The success audit will assist in that examination as will the collective debrief once done.

Start with the audit team, including as it must both members and staff. The teams may work independently of each other or together, whichever makes the participants more comfortable and productive. Review the audit principles outlined above to make sure that everyone is clear on the concepts. Have some fun discussing the issues before hand, thereby arming them mentally and emotionally for the tour.

Without taking the principles with you, break up into smaller groups and wander the facility on three different days, one of which is busy, the second less so and the third essentially an off day. Take lots of notes while you wander but avoid explaining what you've seen while doing so. Debrief at the end of each tour, expanding on your initial observations of the specifics that you've observed. Again, don't philosophize.

Have all groups gather for a formal group debrief one week after all the individual tours have been completed. During that week, people will be discussing what they've seen with others who were both on the tour and those who were not. This will have primed them for the deeper examination which will now begin. Have them do random associations between the things which they've seen and the philosophy hidden in the details. Once done, walk through each of the twenty-two principles and get a take on how well or poorly the club's done during the audit.

Now the fun can begin. Take your deficiencies and devise tactics to address each of those shortcomings. Set up an action plan for their implementation. Don't be abstract---the time for doing so is past. Move from philosophy to action and make those actions doable in the near term.

Make your audit / action debriefs an ongoing part of the board, committee and staff responsibilities. Create an audit mentality and a culture that welcomes self-examination. Remember, all knowledge is question driven and each time you tour you should be asking yourself both what and why. The number of upside surprises that you'll encounter will quite amaze you.

And if you think you know your club, remember this verse from one of T.S. Eliot's poems:

*"We shall not cease from exploration...  
And the end of all our exploring...  
Will be to arrive where we started...  
And know that place for the first time."*